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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002548

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/22/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDAN: LOCAL GROUPS ATTACK RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
REPORT

REF: A. AMMAN 2452
[B](#). AMMAN 2385
[C](#). AMMAN 2227
[D](#). AMMAN 2018
[E](#). AMMAN 1115
[F](#). AMMAN 990
[G](#). AMMAN 569

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. Summary: After an initial positive response (ref A) to the 2009 International Religious Freedom (IRF) report, three local organizations have publicly criticized the report. The National Center for Human Rights (NCHR), the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR), and the Jordanian Inter-faith Coexistence Center each stated that religious freedoms are guaranteed under Jordan's constitution and that these freedoms are widely enjoyed by all citizens. NCHR and AOHR further claim that the IRF report will instigate sectarian strife and hinder inter-faith efforts by provoking religious sentiment among minority groups. Local media widely covered the organizations' statements and published editorials questioning the motives of the report and defending Jordan's level of religious freedom. Some editorials and statements, including at least one Christian leader, pointed at non-traditional or Zionist-friendly churches as the real problem. End Summary.

NCHR: "Report Instigates Sectarianism"

[1](#)2. (U) On November 7, the NCHR issued a press statement strongly criticizing the IRF report. The statement warns that the manner in which the U.S. deals with religious freedom may hinder inter-faith dialogue and unity in Jordanian society while bolstering extremism by provoking religious sentiment among minority groups. NCHR called for an evaluation of religious freedom among scholars, thinkers, and the educated instead of through a political report designed to protect U.S. economic and strategic interests. NCHR further states that the report methodology is based on American standards and values and not on the consensus of nations as outlined in international conventions. The statement also argues that there are no contradictions between the Jordanian constitution and the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as highlighted in the IRF report. Finally, the statement says that the IRF report fails to address Israeli practices which discriminate against the Palestinian people and prevent them from conducting the religious rites. (Note: Post will place the complete NCHR statement in English on Intellipedia and e-mail a copy to NEA and DRL. End Note.)

NCHR Statement Opens Floodgate of Criticism

[1](#)3. (U) The NCHR press statement was followed by critical public statements from other non-government bodies and the media, many of which repeated NCHR claims that the IRF report

is misguided and hinders co-existence and dialogue. On November 14, the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR) held a press conference to refute the report. The Director of AOHR, along with Father Rifaat Bader, of the Roman Catholic Church, called the "allegations" in the report "fabrications" and stated that Christians in Jordan enjoy equal rights under the constitution. Father Bader further claimed that the report will instigate sectarian strife and noted that problems lie not with the "traditional churches" but with "missionary groups" who create problems in society. AOHR reportedly urged the government to summon the Ambassador to express anger about the IRF report.

¶4. (U) The Jordanian Inter-faith Coexistence Center, led by Father Nabil Haddad of the Malachite Catholic Church, also issued a public statement on November 16, the first time the Center has done so. The statement was rhetorically less divisive than the NCHR and AOHR statements and did not state the report will instigate sectarianism. However, Father Haddad claimed the 2009 IRF report contained "inaccuracies" though he did claim it was an improvement over prior years' reports. The thrust of the statement was that religious freedoms are guaranteed under the constitution and that the government widely respects these freedoms.

¶5. (U) Local Arabic-language media widely covered the NCHR and Coexistence Center statements, as well as the AOHR press conference. Several editorials also attacked the IRF report with similar claims that religious discrimination does not exist in Jordan and that religious freedom is protected. The editorials also questioned motives behind the report or denounced the U.S. for "judging" other countries when it has

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its own problems. Tareq Masarweh, columnist at Al-Rai daily newspaper, asked the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches in his November 10 column to publicly denounce the IRF report and object to Christian sects that promote Jewish thoughts and Zionism in Jordan. In fact, Masarweh states, "The United States can accept hundreds of Zionist churches but Jordan should not accept one (such) church." (Note: Evangelical churches have often been blamed for supporting Zionism. Comments regarding Zionist churches are often pointed at Evangelical churches or missionary groups. End Note.)

NCHR Attacks Again

¶6. (SBU) NCHR criticism of State Department human rights-related reports has been common under their new leadership, which was changed in July 2008 after former Board Chairman Ahmed Obeidat was asked to resign. The resignation came after Obeidat signed a widely disseminated letter to the GOJ criticizing its economic reform and privatization program. Adnan Badran, a former Prime Minister whose tenure lasted ten months in 2005, was appointed as the new Chairman and Muhyieddeen Touq, former diplomat, took over the day-to-day operations as the Commissioner General. (Note: The NCHR Board Chairman and entire board are appointed by Royal Decree based on the Prime Minister's recommendations. End Note.)

¶7. (SBU) NCHR, in fact, was the most vocal critic of the Jordan chapter of the 2008 Human Rights Reports (HRR). Criticism of the HRR report was detailed in a letter from Badran to the Ambassador. The letter was penned on March 8 and received by Post on March 11, the same day major local media outlets reported on its content with headlines such as "U.S. State Department Report Mostly Based on Unreliable Sources" (Jordan Times, March 11, 2009). Badran claimed the report suffered from "serious methodological problems" and he took special exception to the manner in which NCHR was portrayed. Badran asserted that the NCHR is not influenced by the government and enjoys complete administrative and financial independence, despite the government's block

funding and appointment of NCHR leadership.

18. (SBU) The religious freedom section of the HRR report was also singled out for criticism. Badran's letter claimed that Jordan fully respects religious freedom and that NCHR has never received a single religious freedom complaint despite asking State Department officials in late 2008 to forward any such claims. Badran's letter referred to a November 2008 meeting between Touq and a DRL/IRF visitor to ascertain NCHR openness to receive religious freedom complaints. After the positive response, Post subsequently advised two individuals, a member of the Baha'i assembly and an apostate, to formally lodge complaints using NCHR procedures. Both were unsuccessful in their attempt to file a complaint. The Baha'i assembly unsuccessfully tried on five occasions to schedule a meeting. The apostate left without filing a complaint after the NCHR staffer insisted on meeting in front of two unidentified men.

NCHR Staff and Other Organizations Question NCHR Leadership

19. (C) Some local human rights organizations, such as the Mizan Legal Center for Human Rights and the Adaleh Center for Human Rights, privately question the efficacy of the NCHR under its new leadership and given its relationship with the government. These organizations still contend that NCHR has a role to play, but believe its voice and leadership could be stronger. In particular, they want NCHR to be more critical about issues such as women's rights, citizenship issues, and civil society freedom. Instead, they contend NCHR merely "assists" the government on "easy" issues where there is already a political will, such as trafficking-in-persons and prison reform. NCHR staff have also privately questioned the leadership's criticism of the HRR and IRF report. Atef Al-Majali, Head of the NCHR Complaints Unit, told Poloff on November 8 that he disagrees with NCHR's decision to once again openly criticize another organization's human rights report. (Note: NCHR has also publicly criticized reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, for instance. End Note.) Al-Majali contends that there are religious freedom concerns that, while sensitive, should be openly discussed and addressed.

Comment

110. (C) Comment: Public reaction to the 2009 IRF report was muted until NCHR's statement sparked a wave of criticism. Interestingly, the 2008 IRF report, by all accounts, was far

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more critical towards Jordan but there was relatively little public reaction. Regardless of NCHR's intended purpose, its statements against other organizations' human rights reports are cementing feelings among some activists that NCHR is truly not independent nor fully serving its intended purpose.

Evangelical leaders expressed concern that a public outcry over the report would be directed at "pro-Zionist" and "non-traditional churches." Public intra-Christian fighting after the 2009 report's release remains limited to the above statements, but many Christian leaders hope that the finger-pointing will not increase. Post will monitor the situation and continue to discuss the report and religious freedom issues with the range of interlocutors, including those who have expressed criticism. Further reaction will be reported septel. End Comment.

Beecroft